

EXPLORING PHENOMENOLOGY'S RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S DIGITAL WORLD: A COMMENTARY

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Abstract

In social studies, phenomenology is widely recognized as a research approach deeply rooted in Edmund Husserl's philosophical traditions, and it is highly acclaimed for its ability to explore and understand lived experiences. This commentary aims to offer an overview of the core principles of phenomenology and their practical application to contemporary research, with a particular emphasis on the digital era. Phenomenology's focus on subjective experience and intentions makes it a powerful tool for comprehending the complex nature of human interactions with digital technologies. In an era where digital platforms dominate our social, professional, and personal interactions, the approach provides unique views into how individuals perceive and interpret their digital environment. This paper also explores the methodological adaptations required to apply phenomenology in digital contexts and the challenges researchers may face, as well as clarifies that this approach remains relevant and does not necessitate redundant innovations such as rebranding it as "cyber-phenomenology." By focusing on the relevance of phenomenology in the digital era, this review hopes to lay the groundwork for future studies that will bridge the gap between traditional phenomenological inquiry and modern digital experiences.

Keywords: Digital, Husserl, Phenomenology, Philosophy, Research, Social Issues

Meneroka Perkaitan Fenomenologi dalam Dunia Digital Hari Ini: Sebuah Ulasan Ilmiah

Abstrak

Dalam pengajian sosial, fenomenologi diakui secara luas sebagai pendekatan penelitian yang berakar umbi dalam tradisi falsafah Edmund Husserl, dan sangat disanjung karena kemampuannya untuk menjelajahi dan memahami pengalaman hidup. Objektif ulasan ini adalah untuk menawarkan gambaran keseluruhan prinsip teras fenomenologi dan penerapan praktisnya pada penelitian kontemporer, dengan penekanan khusus pada era digital. Fokus fenomenologi pada pengalaman dan niat subjektif menjadikannya alat yang berkuasa untuk memahami sifat kompleks interaksi manusia dengan teknologi digital. Dalam era di mana platform digital mendominasi interaksi sosial, profesional, dan pribadi kita, pendekatan ini memberikan pandangan unik tentang bagaimana individu melihat dan menafsirkan lingkungan digital mereka. Ulasan ini juga menjelajahi penyesuaian metodologis yang diperlukan untuk menerapkan fenomenologi dalam konteks digital, tantangan yang mungkin dihadapi oleh peneliti, serta menjelaskan bahwa pendekatan ini tetap relevan dan tidak memerlukan inovasi berlebihan seperti pelabelan ulang sebagai "fenomenologi siber". Dengan berfokus pada relevansi fenomenologi di era digital, ulasan ini diharapkan dapat meletakkan dasar bagi penelitian masa depan yang akan menjembatani kesenjangan antara penelitian fenomenologis tradisional dan pengalaman digital modern.

Kata Kunci: *Digital, Husserl, Fenomenologi, Falsafah, Penyelidikan, Isu Sosial.*

Introduction

As a philosophical movement and research approach, phenomenology has its roots in Edmund Husserl's rigorous examination of consciousness and lived experience. Literally, Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, which refers to the appearances of things, how they present themselves in our experience, and the meanings derived from those experiences (Smith, 2018). Since its inception in the early twentieth century (1913), this methodology has offered scholars valuable instruments and ways for understanding human experience at its most fundamental level.

This commentary aims to look into the continuing significance and adaptability of phenomenological approaches in contemporary research, particularly emphasizing their application in our increasingly digitalized world. Phenomenology's emphasis on direct, embodied experience becomes increasingly pertinent as we navigate an era in which digital technologies increasingly mediate human experience. As we realize, digital platforms and technologies have significantly transformed how we interact with the world, learn, socialize, and work (Chang & Chang, 2023). To understand these experiences, analytical approaches must be used that express both their uniqueness and their incorporation into our daily lives. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on describing and analyzing the fundamental structures of experience, provides scholars with the theoretical and methodological tools needed to study these complex digital phenomena experienced by humans as social beings (Fadhila et al., 2024; Tagliagambe, 2023). This rationale leads me to believe that this method remains relevant in allowing us to study how people engage with digital technologies and how those interactions impact their perception, comprehension, and being in the world.

The next parts of this commentary will discuss how phenomenological concepts can be effectively employed in modern digital research, looking at both the methodological issues and opportunities in this context. We will discuss how phenomenological studies can be employed in digital settings, necessary methodological adaptations, and why this method is still relevant for understanding modern digital experiences. In other words, this research aim is to demonstrate how phenomenology can establish a connection between traditional philosophical research and contemporary digital experience in this review, thereby providing valuable insights still necessary for comprehending all aspects of human experience.

A Historical Perspective of Phenomenology

Phenomenology initially covers the fields of philosophy and sociology. The term phenomenology was first introduced by J.H. Lambert in 1764 to denote the Theory of Truth (Griffing, 1893). This term subsequently broadened in meaning. As noted by Kockelmans (Moustakas, 1994), phenomenology had been applied in philosophy as early as 1765, it was subsequently articulated and formalized as a technical concept by Hegel.

He posits that phenomenology relates to knowledge emerging within consciousness, serving as a science that delineates an individual's understanding based on their consciousness and experiences (Sedgwick & Pinkard, 1995).

Phenomenology was significantly developed as a philosophical discipline by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who is frequently regarded as the Father of Phenomenology. His philosophy gained significant popularity during the 1950s. The primary objective of this philosophy is to establish a basis for philosophy to operate as a separate and independent science (Smith, 2018).

Initially, phenomenology encompassed a collection of philosophical and social research methodologies, along with the study of art. The actual crisis in science drove Husserl's advent of phenomenology. During this crisis, science is unable to offer any guidance to humanity. Science is removed from the realities of daily existence. According to Husserl, the notion of real theory has been completely overlooked by numerous advanced disciplines in contemporary scientific society (Moran, 2012).

Husserl critiqued science at the time for falling into objectivism, a manner of viewing the universe as a collection of objective facts drawn from common scientific knowledge. According to him, this objectivistic view undervalues human consciousness, as if everything can be assessed objectively without regard for the distinctive dynamics of human consciousness, also known as "Lebenswelt" (Larrabee et al., 1997). This term denotes a comprehensive approach to studying humanity that includes all aspects of life we directly experience, such as social relationships, the physical environment, and personal beliefs.

Husserl used phenomenology to explore the link between theory and the experienced world, aiming to develop theoretical concepts that could be applied to everyday social practice (Wita & Mursal, 2022). Husserl also asserted that scientific knowledge has been detached from the daily experience of the activities in which experience and knowledge are anchored (Husserl, 2012). For this reason, he subsequently suggested that to comprehend phenomena and how they are experienced, they must be approached with a unique and thorough subjective perspective.

Furthermore, Husserl developed phenomenology as a method to study how things appear to consciousness, arguing that all knowledge and experience must be understood through the lens of conscious awareness. To grasp further, let us first go over the fundamental components of phenomenology as an empirical method below.

Fundamental Components of Phenomenology

At its core, phenomenology tries to comprehend the nature of lived experience by carefully describing and analyzing how phenomena seem to consciousness. Numerous scholars (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Mortari et al., 2023; van Manen, 2016; Wita & Mursal, 2022) have noted that the foundation of the phenomenological method is built on three important ideas (intentionality, Epoché, and The Lifeworld), which continue to guide researchers' inquiries into human experience.

Intentionality

The first core doctrine in phenomenology is the teaching that every act of consciousness we perform, every experience that we have, is intentional: it is essentially a "consciousness of" or an "experience of" something or other (Sokolowski, 1999). Our mind is always focused on an object whenever we are aware of something. For example, when we see something, we see specific things like a tree or a building. When we imagine, we think of imaginary things like a car driving down a road. When we remember, we recall past events or objects. When we judge, we consider facts or situations. In every case, our thoughts and experiences are always connected to some kind of object. Every intention has its intended object.

As Husserl elaborated in his book, "Ideas" (Husserl, 2012), Intentionality includes both the noetic act (the experiencing) and the noematic content (what is experienced), which form an interconnected structure of conscious experience.

Epoché

The second essential component is the phenomenological reduction, which is achieved by the epoché (bracketing) technique, also known as Phenomenological Reduction. It is a representation of Husserl's approach to reaching pure phenomena. This process involves putting away our prejudices, theories, and beliefs about the world to see things as they truly are (Moustakas, 1994).

For example, if you are studying how an individual experiences as a heavy cigarette smoker, you would set aside any scientific knowledge about smoking (like the effects of nicotine or the social stigma about people who smoke) and focus purely on the individual's experience of the motives, feelings, and thoughts that arise while smoking the cigarettes.

The epoché technique enables the researcher to explore the individual's subjective experience without previous preconceptions or biases. A more lucid and genuine comprehension of occurrences can be attained by withholding judgment and engaging deeply with the raw data of human experience (van Manen, 2016). This bracketing method allows researchers to reveal the substance of lived experiences, offering significant insights into the complex nature of the human mind and perception.

The Lifeworld (Lebenswelt)

Husserl's concept of the lifeworld, presented in his 1936 book "The Crisis of European Sciences," denotes the collective realm of direct experience that underpins all human endeavors (Moran, 2012). Alfred Schutz further elaborated on this concept in 1967 in "The Phenomenology of the Social World," emphasizing that the lifeworld serves as the intersubjective framework for all human experiences and the construction of meaning (Belvedere, 2019).

Some practical examples of this idea are everyday interactions, like saying hello to a neighbor, which help us understand social relationships and community better. Celebrating a traditional festival really helps us understand and connect with our culture as a group. In a workplace, the everyday tasks and interactions with coworkers shape how employees view their positions and connections with others. In education, what a student goes through in the classroom really influences how they grasp learning. In today's digital age, how we interact on social media and in virtual meetings shapes how people see things and make sense of their social and work lives.

These examples show how the lifeworld includes different parts of everyday life, helping us understand and create meaning through our direct experiences and interactions. Thus, grasping and valuing the Lebenswelt enhances our understanding of human interactions with the world and the emergence of meaning and knowledge in our consciousness.

However, not all experiences may be considered equally worthy of phenomenological study. Phenomenology looks at the essence of experiences related to specific phenomena and the ways in which individuals interpret and consciously reflect on these experiences. Thus, experiences that are rich, unique, complex, and have significant meaning to individuals or groups are often more suitable for phenomenological research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Greening, 2019).

For example, a study of the experience of cancer survivors or individuals with other severe illnesses, the sense of belonging in a sub-cultural community, or the implications of employing a new technology can offer a deep understanding of human consciousness and meaning-making. On the contrary, experiences that are more common, simple, or routine may not provide the same level of study significance. As further explained by Greening (2019), the crucial aspect is to select experiences from a phenomenon that illuminate a fundamental aspect of human perception and existence.

Hence, the three aforementioned fundamental components can provide phenomenological researchers with substantial tools for the lived experiences of individuals. Intentionality helps researchers see how people focus their attention and find meaning in what they experience. Epoché allows researchers to set aside their usual beliefs to see things in a new way. The lifeworld concept helps researchers understand how experiences fit into larger contexts of meaning.

Phenomenology and the Digital Era

In today's society, our everyday lives are intimately connected to digital technologies, from the minute we check our phones in the morning to our last social media scroll before bed. Phenomenology provides a unique perspective on how we perceive and interpret digital interactions. Rather than focusing exclusively on what technology does, phenomenology allows us to understand how people experience and interact with technology in their daily lives.

Using digital technologies allows us to engage with machines and immerse ourselves in significant worlds of relationships, work, and entertainment (Fuchs, 2015; Sukmayadi et al., 2024). For example, when someone opens a video call application, they do not just see pixels on a screen; they enter a place of social connection where they can feel present with loved ones despite physical distance.

This is what phenomenologists refer to as lived experience, and it is critical to understanding how digital devices become significant components of our lives.

Digital platforms revolutionized how we preserve relationships and build communities (Potter, 2021). As an illustration, social media platforms offer fresh methods of experiencing friendship and community. When individuals post a life update on social media, they are not just sharing information but also engaging in a communal social environment in which likes, comments, and shares are significant expressions of support and connection. Phenomenology enables us to comprehend the process by which these digital interactions transform into meaningful social experiences that are both real and significant to users.

Personal experiences with digital technology are both complex and important. Consider how people use their smartphones: it is more than just a device; it is an extension of their everyday lives, memories, and personal or professional identities. Photos on phones are more than simply digital images; they represent meaningful links to personal memories and experiences. Similarly, personal messaging applications provide intimate settings for private talks that feel as authentic and important as in-person contacts.

These digital experiences challenge conventional conceptions of existence, time, and space. Phenomenological methods for digital encounters can help researchers better understand how technology becomes significant in people's lives. This understanding extends beyond technical capabilities or user interfaces to demonstrate how digital technologies enable new ways of experiencing connection, work, and personal life (Tagliagambe, 2023). As our world becomes increasingly digital, this phenomenological perspective becomes essential for understanding how people actually live and make meaning in their technology-mediated lives.

Methodological Adaptations in Digital Contexts

While the fundamental concepts of phenomenology remain constant, their application in digital environments requires some methodological adjustments. This is reasonable and that it will further solidify phenomenology as a sustainable research method. These adjustments ensure that phenomenological investigation remains practical while retaining its conceptual integrity.

For researchers, they must carefully consider how to capture and analyze experiences that occur in virtual spaces while maintaining phenomenological rigor.

One notable adaptation is the data collection process in digital settings. I experienced this myself during the previous Covid-19 pandemic, when interviewing in person was very challenging. While traditional face-to-face interviews allow researchers to observe subtle nuances of expression and body language, digital interviews present both challenges and opportunities. The dawn of the digital era has inspired researchers to develop mitigating strategies. In his book "Qualitative Online Interviews," Salmons (2015) has illustrated that video conferencing can yield valuable data when researchers take the time to establish comfortable virtual environments for participants and develop strategies to build rapport in digital environments.

The asynchronous nature of some digital communications, such as voice-note or real-time textual interviews, requires researchers to develop new approaches for achieving the depth and richness characteristic of phenomenological inquiry. One potential solution is to implement follow-up interviews to further investigate the responses of participants and resolve any ambiguities or uncertainties. Another strategy is integrating visual aids or prompts (such as power points or notes) into the digital communication platform to encourage participants to provide more elaborative and reflective responses. The dynamics of the digital environment have forced us to adapt, and naturally, a research method develops along with technological advancements.

So, it is astonishing if there are still academics who insist on asserting to their students that online interviews cannot be considered part of the phenomenological method or qualitative interviews; this viewpoint is utterly irrelevant. As technology and civilization continue to evolve, so should our research methods. Embracing digital communication platforms and utilizing visual aids can enhance the quality and depth of the data collected, ultimately leading to more meaningful and impactful research outcomes. Academics must adapt to these changes and embrace technology's possibilities for conducting research in the modern world.

Then, participant observation in digital settings presents distinct methodological challenges. Conventional phenomenological observation requires modification to accommodate the diverse methods by which people interact with digital platforms.

Christine Hine's work on "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2008) and Robert Kozinets' "netnography" (Kozinets, 2019) provide valuable insights for ethnographical and phenomenological researchers, suggesting approaches for observing both visible online behaviors and understanding the underlying experiences that shape these interactions.

For example, in research on individual experience within online communities, a researcher might observe how people interact and experience in an online forum dedicated to a specific hobby, such as online gaming. The researcher would not only look at the visible behaviors, like posting messages, sharing patterns, and commenting on others' play but also join as an online gamer to dig deeper into the underlying experiences that shape these interactions. In other words, researchers must consider how to observe and document experiences that occur across multiple digital platforms and devices, often simultaneously.

The notion of bracketing (*epoché*) acquires additional dimensions in digital research. Researchers must not only set aside their own experiences and beliefs but also their technological knowledge and biases. They must be able to investigate the mediation of experience by technology while refraining from deterministic assumptions on its effects (Ritter, 2021). This requires careful consideration of how the researchers' own digital experiences and competencies may influence their interpretation of the participants' lived experiences. Further elaboration on qualitative data collection and analysis online can reference to a compilation of scholarly works edited by Lester and Paulus (Lester & Paulus, 2023) on qualitative digital research, which offers valuable guidance for capturing and analyzing the temporal aspects of digital experience while upholding phenomenological rigor.

Then, digital environments also present unique ethical considerations. Issues of privacy, consent, and data protection become more complex when research occurs in virtual spaces. Following recent studies for online research ethics (Sugiura et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017; Woodfield & Iphofen, 2017), phenomenological researchers must develop clear protocols for protecting participant privacy while maintaining phenomenological inquiry's rich, descriptive nature. This includes careful consideration of how to handle digital artifacts, screen captures, and online interactions while respecting participant confidentiality.

Beyond the above methodological discussion, phenomenology provides insightful analysis by means of its practical implementations in digital environments.

Through emphasizing personal experiences, researchers can find rich viewpoints on digital interactions such as in the field of digital healthcare and social media. In digital healthcare, by emphasizing patients' experiences of care and communication in these digital environments, phenomenological study can explore how they experience online consultations or online health forums.

For Instance, a study by Grinfelde (2022) looks at how the shift to online consultation during COVID-19 has changed the clinical encounter, particularly looking at whether virtual interactions may retain key components of face-to-face medical visits like sympathetic perspective and embodied risk. In fact, other studies have also shown that integrating phenomenology into digital health could address issues in the field by focusing human experience in the design of digital health solutions, ultimately leading to more functional, ethical, and user-responsive technologies (Fiordelli, 2024; Neubauer et al., 2019)

Similarly, in the field of social media, phenomenology uncovers the manner in which individuals construct and showcase their identities on social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. This study illuminates the relationship between algorithms, social interaction, and self-expression. Studies on how certain individuals or influencers construct their online impression management (Li et al., 2024; Sukmayadi et al., 2024; Yılmaz et al., 2020) offer a framework for comprehending the relational processes that influence user-platform interactions. These examples collectively illustrate the practical implications of phenomenology for strengthening our understanding of digital experiences and fostering the reintegration of empathy and the "social" aspect into digital platforms.

Is Phenomenology still relevant in this digital age?

The continuing significance of phenomenology in the digital age arises from its distinctive capacity to provide insight into the fundamental structures of human experience, regardless of the context in which such experience occurs. Claims for new approach like "cyber-phenomenology" as highlighted by few scholars (Bungin, 2023; Rofiah, 2024) often arise from a misunderstanding of phenomenology's fundamental nature. As pointed by Bungin (2023) in his book, his version

of “cyber-phenomenology” refer to individuals' subjective experiences in cyberspace or using digital technologies through a cyber-phenomenology approach.

This definition indicates that there is no substantial distinction from conventional phenomenology; the only difference lies in the context of experiencing the phenomenon, specifically within a digital framework. Whereas the traditional phenomenological approach already contains the necessary tools for understanding digital experience because it focuses on the essential structures of consciousness and individual experiences, which remain constant across contexts and platforms (Aldea et al., 2022; Casper & Haueis, 2023; Loidolt, 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Hence, the term cyber-phenomenology may lack conceptual clarity. As further highlighted by Casper and Haueis (2023), It risks creating confusion about what is genuinely new in the study of digital experiences versus what can be addressed through existing phenomenological methods.

Certainly, it is necessary to modify the methods of data collection and analysis; however, this does not require the creation of a new term. Creating a “conceptual repackaging” that is essentially similar to an existing one is akin to “reinventing the wheel” or ending up a “redundant terminology” because it replicates a fundamental method or concept that is still sufficient and applicable, resulting in unnecessary innovation.

In the future, this concept may be relevant provided that the emphasis of study shifts from human consciousness and experience to that of artificial intelligence's awareness and experience. This is a substantial distinction that has garnered the curiosity of certain researchers (Schroeder, 2015; Vallverdú et al., 2017). According to Vallverdú et al. (2017) and Ritter (2021), their concept of cyber-phenomenology as part of post-phenomenological method suggests that in the future, advancements in artificial intelligence, cyborg technology, or artificial consciousness that emulates human awareness may be further studied to redefine the essence of experience derived from non-human entities. The primary distinguishing characteristic is that we are unable to directly access or confirm AI's “inner experience,” making traditional phenomenological methods challenging to put into practice.

This concept is, in my view, visionary and offers a clear conceptual framework where the subject of the study focuses on future artificial intelligence technology that may possess unique awareness and

experiences (if it exists), distinguishing it from humans beyond mere contextual differences of setting or medium.

Therefore, while the digital age presents new contexts for phenomenological analysis, the fundamental concepts and methods of phenomenology are sufficient to manage these without requiring a new “repackaging term” that may not add substantial value to the existing theoretical framework.

Conclusion

As shown throughout this commentary, phenomenology continues to provide valuable insights into human experience in the current era. The fundamental principles of phenomenology remain a relevant research method, requiring careful adaptation rather than repackaging another term for digital contexts. These adjustments have enabled scholars to maintain philosophical rigor while developing new methods for researching digital experiences. By carefully applying phenomenological methodologies to digital research, we obtain deeper insights into how people experience presence, community, and purpose in digital environments.

Looking forward, researchers may concentrate on the development of new methodological tools while maintaining phenomenological rigor, fostering collaboration between phenomenologists and digital researchers, and constructing frameworks for understanding emerging digital phenomena. Additionally, the development of ethical guidelines for digital research will become increasingly important as technology continues to evolve. Future studies might also explore the interdisciplinary applications of phenomenological methods, integrating them with disciplines such as cognitive science, artificial intelligence (AI), and human-computer interaction. For instance, studying the use of virtual reality or artificial intelligence as an educational tool by integrating cognitive science and phenomenological approaches can provide a more profound understanding of human perception and experience in digital environments.

Finally, phenomenology's continuing relevance stems from its ability to illuminate the fundamental structures of human experience, whether in physical or digital contexts. As we explore the multifaceted landscape of the digital age, phenomenological methods will remain vital resources for understanding human experience in all of its forms, bridging the gap

between conventional philosophical studies and contemporary digital experiences.

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